

Town of Cape May Point
(Town of Sea Grove)
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
West of Cape May on County Road 606
Cape May Point
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1054

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF CAPE MAY POINT (Town of Sea Grove)

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, West of Cape May on County Road 606, Cape May Point, Cape May County, New Jersey

Significance: Cape May Point, briefly known as Sea Grove, was established in 1875 as a Presbyterian resort. Because of its close proximity to Cape May City, the resort's commercial district never developed substantially.

History: The Presbyterian resort was founded by Alexander Whilldon, a successful Philadelphia wool merchant, who sold his inherited land to the Sea Grove Association, after they were chartered by the state legislature. The original Board of Directors, Alexander Whilldon, Dr. V.M.D. Marcy, Hon. Downs Edmonds, J. Newton Walker and John Wannamaker aspired to,

furnish a religious and moral seaside home, for the glory of God and the welfare of man, where the latter may be refreshed and invigorated, body and soul, and better fitted for the highest and noblest duties of life.¹

With the encouragement and financial support of John Wanamaker, Whilldon supervised the association in establishing and marketing city lots. An 1876 plan of Sea Grove shows wide boulevards radiating from a central hub where community religious services were held. The Association built a pavilion in 1875, which stood in the center of the village, encircled by Pavilion Avenue. It was an open octagonal structure, 100 feet in diameter, and is said to have held 1500 people.²

Soon after Sea Grove's founding, three hotels and a few private dwellings were erected. The largest hotel was the Sea Grove House, which stood in the block bound by Beach, Cape and Lincoln Avenues and Sure Street. Two other hotels, the Union House and the Cape House, were both located on Cape Avenue. Carefully surveyed and numbered lots covered the land between the Sea Grove House and the Pavilion and the area stretching from Lake Lily to the Delaware Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. In an attempt to attract a summer population, the association provided clergymen with \$500.00 lots. By 1876 a substantial number of dwellings had been built, mostly concentrated in the southwest section of town, between the pavilion and the beach.³ Along with the purchase of cottages, new residents were given free passes on the West Jersey railroad.

¹ Alfred M. Heston, South Jersey: A History, 1664-1924 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc, 1924), 550.

² Herbert M. Beitel and Vance C. Enck, Cape May County: A Pictorial History (Norfolk: Donning Company, 1988), 142.

³ H.C. Woolman and T.F. Rose, Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast (Philadelphia: Woolman and Rose, 1878; reprint, Toms River, N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985), 359-359.

In 1878, under the new name of Cape May Point, Sea Grove attracted a variety of visitors. The Seaside Home was founded for underprivileged children and their parents. John D. Lankenau, patron of the Lankenau Hospital in Philadelphia, provided a house to accommodate nurses and hospital employees. St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church, originally built in 1876 for the centennial exhibition, was purchased and moved to Cape May Point in 1879. It has since been moved several times, in retreat from the receding shoreline and now stands on Lake Drive.⁴ Also in 1890, a Camp Meeting for the United Brethren of Christ was formed at Cape May Point. Though small, it apparently was successful, since the property was not split up and sold until 1935.⁵

Quite a few cottages dating from the third quarter of the nineteenth century still stand in Cape May Point. One noteworthy example is the vacation home of department store magnate John Wannamaker (1838-1922). Reportedly, President Benjamin Harrison and his wife were entertained by then Postmaster General Wannamaker in Cape May Point around 1889. The Harrisons were said to have enjoyed their stay so much that a group of friends raised \$10,000.00 and erected a house with twenty rooms for them. The Harrisons spent the summers of 1890 and 1891 in the house, but abandoned the property after Mrs. Harrison died. It was purchased by the Wannamaker family in 1909.⁶

Previous to the coming of the Sea Grove Association, the lighthouse at Cape May Point was the only standing structure in the area. The present lighthouse is the third on the site. The first, erected in 1823, was replaced in 1847 when the original beacon "toppled into the sea." The second structure, also became endangered by the waves, and was replaced in 1859, by the present lighthouse.⁷ During World War II, the area near the lighthouse was taken over by the United States Government. A concrete gun emplacement from this era survives, though now sitting well into the bay.

During the early twentieth century when the Association sold much of its land, the architectural personality of the city began to change. Constant erosion took its toll, destroying many cottages and relocating other structures further inland. The Shoreham Hotel, erected in 1890, is one of the few remaining beachfront buildings. Now a summer retreat for the Sisters of St. Joseph, the hotel recalls the city's early religious roots, though its patrons are of a different denomination.⁸ The commercial

⁴ Beitel and Enck, 145.

⁵ Cape May Chamber of Commerce, Tales of the Jersey Cape, 20.

⁶ Cape May Chamber of Commerce, 20.

⁷ Kim Ruth, "New Jersey's Lighthouses," New Jersey Outdoors (November/December 1983, mimeographed copy in New Jersey State Library), n.p.

⁸ George F. Boyer, George and J. Pearson Cunningham, Cape May County Story (Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975), 86-87.

district consists of a single building, "the General Store." Perhaps because of its proximity to Cape May City, two miles down Sunset Blvd., the Point remains relatively undeveloped. Potential erosion might also keep perspective builders from investing. Residents recall the days when other avenues extended beyond Harvard, a street currently threatened by the waves. Today Cape May Point is frequented by birds traveling the Atlantic flyway. The many birders who flock to the point each fall rarely remain off-season, and the town of 267 becomes smaller every year.

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- Sources:
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Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.